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FOR NEA/ARP:AMACDONALD

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IR](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: IRAN'S RED LINE IN YEMEN

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (S) SUMMARY. "Iran is a crucial neighbor so Yemen should respect its red lines and it should respect Yemen's red lines too," said Minister of Foreign Affairs Abu Bakr al-Qirbi during a January 19 interview with an independent, sometimes sensationalist, news outlet. The comment, apparently unprovoked, reflects Yemen's reluctantly pragmatic relationship with Iran, a relationship that is often shrouded in suspicion. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) During a January 21 meeting on other topics, the DCM asked Foreign Ministry Protocol Chief Abdullah al-Radhi what provoked the Foreign Minister's comment about Iran crossing Yemen's "red lines." Al-Radhi, who spent a total of 25 years in Iran both as a student and a diplomat, eventually serving as Yemen's ambassador to Iran, explained that although no specific incident had triggered the Foreign Minister's remarks, Yemen was tired of Iran's "cultural and religious interference" in Yemen.

13. (C) This interference, according to al-Radhi, has been especially acute in Yemen's Hadramawt Governorate. Beginning in the early 1990s, Yemen opened several electricity and construction projects in this region to the Iranians. In return, complained al-Radhi, the Iranians began trying to convert and/or politicize the Hadramis. "They're trying to use Shi'a communities in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen like they use Hizballah in Lebanon) as a political card," said al-Radhi. "This kind of religious and cultural interference," added al-Radhi, "is precisely the kind of 'red line' to which the Foreign Minister was referring."

IF IT'S TRUE...

14. (S) Yemen currently maintains close relations with Iran, despite deep suspicions of their intentions. A number of ministerial visits have taken place, most recently by Iran's Housing and Construction Minister to Yemen in early 2009. Although al-Radhi described the Iranians as "not open, difficult to talk to, willing to lie, and full of hidden agendas," he concluded by noting that Yemen appreciates Iran's "attitudes towards certain Arab issues," adding, "... if it's true."

15. (C) This sentiment appears to be shared with other ROYG officials as well. During a recent dinner at the DCM's residence, an important tribal sheikh and Member of Parliament Sheikh Mohammed Nagi al-Shaif, asserted that Iran was fomenting violence in Gaza by supporting Hamas. The night's prominent Yemeni government guests agreed with al-Shaif's assessment that by interfering in Gaza, Iran's goal was to keep the Arab Middle East unstable in order to exert more influence regionally.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

¶6. (U) In November 2008 an Iranian man was sentenced to death, and 11 other Iranian nationals were sentenced to 25 years in prison, for drug smuggling, confirming for many suspicions of Iran's nefarious activity in Yemen. Iranians in Yemen, no matter what the reason, are often viewed with distrust. Earlier in the year a group of Baha'is, a religious minority persecuted in Iran, were publicly accused of spying for Iran following their detainment by the Ministry of Interior on charges of proselytizing.

¶7. (C) The ROYG's longest standing complaint is that the Iranians support the al-Houthi rebellion in Saada. Post's contacts in the governorate report that Hizballah flags and pictures of Hizballah Chief Hassan Nasrallah are commonly used by the al-Houthis to rally support. Post has not been able to independently confirm these reports. The majority of people in Saada are Zaidi Shi'a, a different sect of Shiism from the predominant Shi'a sect in Iran, with few cultural and historical ties between them. The al-Houthis do however represent the sector of the population discontent with the centralized, predominantly Sunni ROYG.

¶8. (S) COMMENT. Given that Yemen tries assiduously to avoid increasing tension with Iran, the Foreign Minister's pushie remarks must be viewed as reflecting a sharply higher level of concern by the ROYG regarding Tehran's intentions in Yemen. END COMMENT.
SECHE